

Clark B. Olsen, Witness to a Civil Rights Killing, Dies at 85

The Rev. Clark B. Olsen addressing the Unitarian General Assembly in Portland, Ore., in 2015. “Chances, happenstance; I’m alive, he’s not,” he once said of the murder of a fellow pastor, James J. Reeb, who was with Mr. Olsen in Selma, Ala., in 1965 to show support for voting rights and other causes. Nancy Pierce/Unitarian Universalist Association

By Neil Genzlinger

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The Rev. Clark B. Olsen, who responded to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s call for clergy members to come to Selma, Ala., in March 1965 and ended up as a witness to one of the most galvanizing murders of the civil rights era, died on Jan. 21 — Martin Luther King Day — at his home in Asheville, N.C. He was 85.

His daughter, Marika Olsen, said the cause was heart failure.

Mr. Olsen, who was white, had traveled to Selma to show support for voting rights and other causes two days after marchers there had been attacked in the clash known as Bloody Sunday. He was walking with two other white Unitarian ministers, Orloff W. Miller and James J. Reeb, when they were set upon by white thugs.

“One of them carried a club,” Mr. Olsen told CNN 35 years later, “and he swung this club. I just remember how hard he swung it.”

It struck Mr. Reeb in the head. He died two days later.

The killing shocked the nation and helped President Lyndon B. Johnson push forward with the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#), which was signed into law that August.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others during a march to the Selma courthouse for a memorial service for Mr. Reeb. His killing shocked the nation and helped President Lyndon B. Johnson push forward with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Associated Press

Mr. Olsen, who testified at a trial in which three men were acquitted by an all-white jury, [told his story countless times](#) in schools, talks and interviews over the years. The attackers had come at the three ministers from across the street, and Mr. Reeb’s fate was just a matter of positioning.

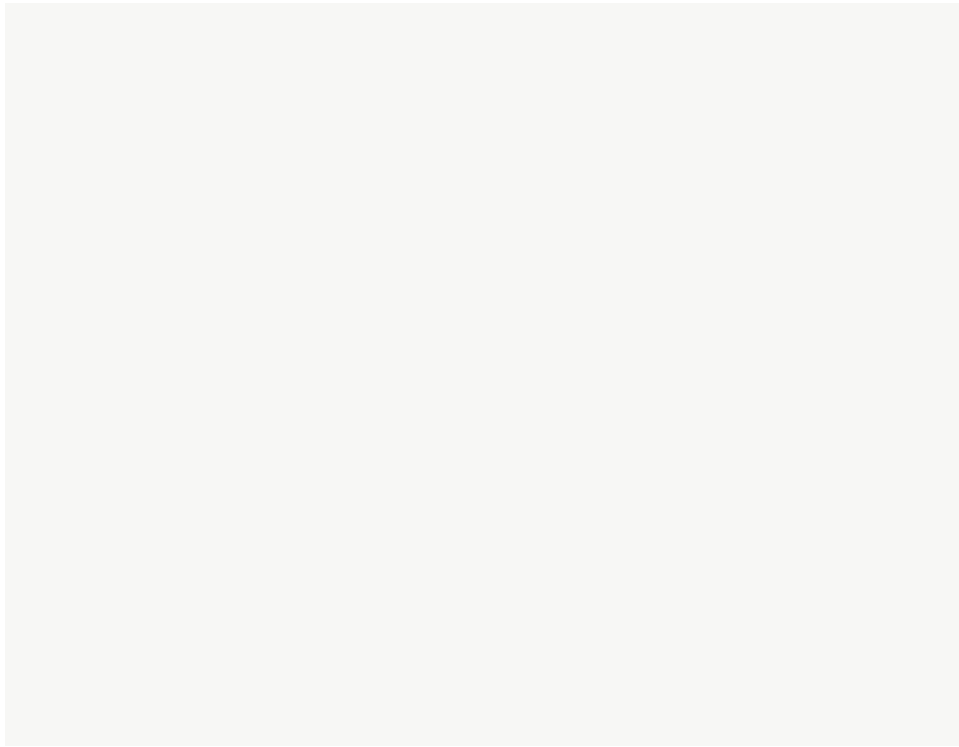
“He happened to be walking on the curb side of the sidewalk, and I happened to be walking on the building side of the sidewalk,” Mr. Olsen [told The Citizen Times](#) of Asheville in 2015. “Chances, happenstance; I’m alive, he’s not.”

Clark Bird Olsen was born on June 22, 1933, in Boston. His father, Arthur, was

also a Unitarian minister, and his mother, Catherine (Bird) Olsen, was a homemaker.

He grew up in Toledo, Ohio, and attended Oberlin College, earning a bit of news coverage in 1954 when he was one of two American students chosen to go to the Soviet Union as part of a Soviet-American exchange (although, he later said, no Soviet students ended up coming to the United States).

“I as a junior in college found myself lying in bed in a hotel looking out at the red stars on the top of the Kremlin towers, saying to myself, ‘How the hell did I get here?’ ” he [recalled in a 2017 talk](#) at the National Museum of American History in Washington. “But I took a lot of pictures — 200 pictures.”



Mr. Olsen in Moscow in 1954. He was one of two American students chosen to go to the Soviet Union as part of a Soviet-American exchange. via Olsen Family

It was a time, during the Cold War, when few Americans had seen the Soviet Union, and he used those photographs to start a sideline giving show-and-tell lectures. (The C.I.A., his daughter said, was also interested in the pictures.) On a return visit in 1959, he became enchanted with the elevator operator at his Moscow hotel, Ludmilla Stefutkina.

After he returned a year later and married her, his efforts to bring her to the United States — which eventually succeeded — made news across the country, partly because the Soviets [had just shot down](#) an American spy plane and captured its pilot, Francis Gary Powers.

After graduating from Harvard Divinity School in 1959 and ministering for a time in Westboro, Mass., Mr. Olsen took a ministerial post in Berkeley, Calif., in 1962. After Bloody Sunday — when the future United States representative John Lewis was among those beaten — Dr. King urged religious leaders to come to Selma for a subsequent march.

“I heard that on the radio and my first thought was, ‘I’d like to go,’ ” Mr. Olsen

said. But, besides having a packed schedule, he couldn't afford the long trip. Then a couple in the Berkeley congregation offered to pay his way.

"I suddenly had to rethink all those excuses," he said.

His plane was delayed, so he missed the march Dr. King led that Tuesday afternoon. But he reached Selma later in the day and ran into Mr. Reeb and [Mr. Miller](#), whom he knew. They went to dinner, and they were attacked after they left the restaurant.

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Mr. Olsen's recounting of the story also included a harrowing ambulance ride as he and Mr. Miller tried to get Mr. Reeb help, pursued by a carload of men who seemed threatening.

At the trial of the accused assailants, he positively identified one defendant, Elmer Cook. Of the other two, the brothers [Namon](#) and William Hoggle, he could say only that they "resemble in some degree the men who attacked us."

Mr. Olsen later [took a ministerial post](#) in Morristown, N.J., and then became a counselor for businesses and other organizations on matters of cultural change.

His first marriage ended in divorce. In 1977 he married Anna Rogers. She survives him, as do his daughter; a son, Todd; and a brother, Lee.

In his talks and writings about the killing, Mr. Olsen often noted with dismay that it seemed to take the death of a white minister to spur action on the Voting Rights Bill — not the killing of a black man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, the month before.

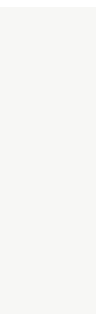
"The murder of a young black man had provoked little attention," [he wrote](#) in 2001. "The murder of a white clergyman had moved the president and Congress to action. Surely that was a stark lesson about the problem of race in America."



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